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[K-FILM REVIEWS] 다찌마와 리 (Dajjimawa Lee)

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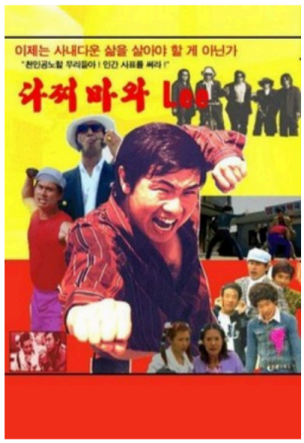

Midnight. When 'they' go to sleep, but some other people stay up to fill that void, to satisfy that hunger for films which had been eating them up the entire day. Watching strange little films, obscure works which can't be classified into 'mainstream' or 'arthouse'; things you'd be embarrassed to show your parents, or just rare treats of great cinema, removed from tickets sales, DVD format wars, controversies over production and the like. Just you and the film, two hours (or more) of visual adrenaline down your cerebral cortex. I still remember those nights, when coming home half drunk I'd throw in a crappy 2nd generation tape, pop up another couple of beers, and enjoy all sort of strange little films with a few good friends. From glorious Shaw Brothers musicals to ruthless Yakuza flicks, from sleazy Korean 80s melodramas to the occasional Roger Corman. I forgot many things over the years, but I still remember those moments, when movies became much more than a roll of film stock made to make some money. And although age, jobs, even marriages in some cases often got in the way when trying to bring back that portion of our youth, I still try to stage one of those 'Midnight Screenings' every now and then. Because they remind me why I keep watching films the way I do. Removed from audio and video, extra features, production meetings or screen quotas. Just the passion for film, just the memories. The memories of those midnights...

Kim Doo-Han, Sirasoni, Kim Choon-Sam, Choi Bae-Dal, Choi Hong-Man, Choi Min-Soo... Korea has had numerous heroes maintaining the law in this ruthless dog-eats-dog world, protecting the weak and feeding the po... anyway. Great men, fighting for a noble cause, eradicating evil from our society, making feel you safe walking alone at night. They were the pride of the nation, but one of them particularly stood out, higher than all of them, almost touching the sky. He was the most skilled fighter, the most charismatic with the ladies, the most understanding with his foes. His name...

Shanghai Park: 대체 그토록 화려한 무술 실력과 올곧은 정신을 자랑하는 니놈의 이름을 알고 싶다. (By golly, with fighting skills of such grace, and such a righteous spirit, I must know thy name!)
?: 이름? 흐음, 글쎄. 다른 사람들이 날 부를 때 그러더군. 다찌마와 리라고. (Name? Uh oh... well. People often use that name to address me. Dajjimawa Lee)

1973. A year everyone in Chungmuro would remember for a long time. A mere four months earlier, President Park Jung-Hee declared martial law, announcing he'd gradually disintegrate the National Assembly into pieces, and write the final chapter on Presidential elections voted directly by the public. In November of 1972, the 제4공화국 (Fourth Republic) of Korea began in full force, using Park's 유신헌법 (*yushin heonbeop*, constitutional renovation) as its foundation. Park and his posse became the de facto emperors of the country, thanks to the amazing powers this 'reform' gave them. The film industry had been slowly crumbling for several reasons, last but not least being the emergence of Television as a strong contender in the entertainment field. 1973 was the last time yearly admissions would reach the 100 Million, after the amazing numbers of the 60s, and it would take almost 30 years to reach those numbers again. Companies were closing down left and right, and a big part of this Yushin policy was controlling the media, especially movies, through some of the heaviest censorship the industry had ever seen, in some ways harsher than in the colonial period, trough their new film law. Independent companies were left out in the cold, replaced by governmental committees who would only approve films if they sucked up to Park Jung-Hee's schemes, and of course filmmakers were 'encouraged' to swallow some of their pride and be team players. The 70s were remembered as the era of propaganda films, and are still considered one the darkest decades in Korean film history.

Not many films were successful that year. One of them was Byun Jang-Ho's **눈물의 웨딩드레스 (Wedding Dress in Tears)**, a melodrama starring Sa Mi-Ja (fondly remembered as one of the best 'screen ajummas' in Korean TV Drama history) and Song Jae-Ho. Written by the great Shin Bong-Seung, who would write some important pages in the history of TV Dramas, the film would be remade several times, including the last remake by director Byun in 1990. Another highlights of 1973 was Im Kwon-Taek's **증언 (證言, Testimony)**, which won a special prize at the 13th Edition of the Grand Bell Awards, and even won Kim Chang-Sook a best actress Award at a Film Festival in Taipei. Acting in the film was a young man called Kim Hee-Ra, who would become one of the most beloved action actors in the country. Right near Christmas of that year, in a little town called Onyang in Chungcheong Province, a boy who would grow up watching people like Kim Hee-Ra, who would learn from their films and find his own voice thirty years later was born. His name? Ryu Seung-Wan.

Chungcheong Province was not exactly the hotbed of avantgarde Cinema in the 70s and 80s, but young Ryu grew up watching films. He'd drive from Onyang to Cheonan to attend Saturday afternoon screenings with his father and uncle. The three would always fight: his father was more an Hollywood type, while his uncle preferred Hong Kong Films. Fascinated by the skills of actors like Jackie Chan and Sammo Hung, he ended up following his uncle. The routine would be hitting the billiard rooms first, waiting for his uncle's games to end, and then head to the small theater in his hometown for the weekly screening of Shaw Brothers classics. You could say Ryu literally grew up with Hong Kong films. Should we thank his uncle, then?

--

화녀 : 여기가 서울이로구나.

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2. BREAK OUT YOUR TWENTY SIDED DIE AND THE TRAILER FOR SXSW SELECTED COMEDY ZERO CHARISMA
3. MOTORBIKES AND WHUP ASS IN FIRST TEASER FOR DUSTIN NGUYEN'S ONCE UPON A TIME IN VIETNAM

FEATURED ARTICLES

Twitchvision: Talking WARM BODIES, STAND UP GUYS, BULLET TO THE HEAD & Football Fun
This week's Twitchvision chat was done from the home theatre where I've assembled a crack team of football watchers. Timed almost perfectly with a power outage at the NOLA Superdome, I was on air talking about the Walken/Pacino/Arkin buddy pic Stand Up Guys, Warm Bodies, and Bullet To The Head.While...
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3. FIRST SHOT FROM AMER DIRECTORS' LATEST THE STRANGE COLOUR OF YOUR BODY'S TEARS
4. MATSUDA RYUHEI, ENDO KENICHI AND KITAMURA KAZUKI JOINING THE RAID 2: BERANDAL
5. WATCH THE FIRST TEASER FOR DANISH SCIFI EXODUS

(**Lady Hwa-Nyeo**: So this is Seoul!)

충녀 : 아! 화려한 빌딩의 숲· 너무 좋은 걸. 이제 우린 성공하는 일만 남았다.
(**Lady Chung-Nyeo**: Ahhh... the spectacular jungle of buildings... I just love it. Now all that's left to do is succeed!)

화녀 : 어쩜 서울 사람들은 저런 곳에서 생활을 할 수 있을까? 난 이렇게 보는 것만으로도 어지럼증이 나는걸?
(**Lady Hwa-Nyeo**: How can Seoulites live in places like that. Just looking at those tall buildings makes me dizzy...)

충녀 : 촌스럽기는. 우리 약속하자. 너랑 나랑 열심히 일해서 성공하면 저 삼일빌딩 앞에서 만나기로. 그리고 너랑 나랑 헤어져 있어도 언제나 저 삼일빌딩을 보면서 외로움을 달래자꾸나.
(**Lady Chung-Nyeo**: Hahaha... you're so old fashioned. Let's promise: we'll both work hard, succeed, and meet again in front of that building. So even if we part ways, we'll always be able to look at that building and reminisce about the good moments we spent together, we'll combat our loneliness through our friendship!)

박 : 여어-! 아가씨들. 어째서 이렇게 거리를 방황하고 계신가?
(**Shanghai Park**: Yeoh oooh.... ladies. What are you doing, wandering the streets like that?)

충녀 : 왜들 이래욧? 수작 부리면 소리 지를테야.
(**Lady Chung-Nyeo**: Oh my... what's wrong with you people?! If you keep bothering us... I'll... I'll scream!)

와싱톤 : 이것 참 무서운 걸? 아릿따운 아가씨의 소리가 어떤지 궁금해지는데? 우린 무서운 사람들 아냐. 보아하니 시골에서 일자릴 찾으러 온 것 같은데, 우리가 좋은 자릴 찾아 줄 테니 우릴 따라가시지.
(**Washington**: Brrrr... that's scary. I'm kind of interested about how girls like you scream. We're not bad people. Looking at you, I suppose you came from the countryside looking for work. Not a worry in the world my ladies, if you follow us, we'll find the perfect job for you!)

화녀 : 우린 우리 계획이 있어요. 우리와 갈 길이 다른 분들인 것 같은데 그냥 비켜 주세요.
(**Lady Hwa-Nyeo**: We... we have a plan. It looks like you were headed somewhere else, so please move out of the way)

박 : 그런 식으로 이야기하면 사나이 가슴에 못질을 하는 것과 같아. 젊은 남녀가 눈이 맞아 자유로운 캠프도 가고 하는 것이 세상사 아닌가? 어때 우리 여기서 이럴 게 아니라 가까운 빵집에 가서 나머지 이야기를 나누는 것이...
(**Shanghai Park**: Ahh... if you talk like that, you'll break a man's heart. Isn't this the age when young boys and girls can enjoy their time together freely? How about we go inside that bakery and get to know each other a little better?)

충녀 : 정말 왜들 이래욧?
(**Lady Chung-Nyeo**: What's wrong with you!)

--

Ryu spent his youth watching Shaw Brothers films starring people like David Chiang and other Chang Cheh proteges, like **十三太保 (The Heroic Ones)**, or the Gordon Liu classic **少林三十六房 (The 36th Chamber of Shaolin)**. It was a pretty interesting period to be an action film fan in Korea, as not only there were plenty of action films coming from Hong Kong, but the genre was still strong in Chungmuro, despite the government's crackdown on violent films. Master Jung Chang-Hwa, who had been working with Shaw Brothers ever since his incredibly successful HK debut with **千面魔女 (Temptress Of A Thousand Faces)**, and who directed the classic **죽음의 다섯 손가락 (Five Fingers of Death)**, started a 무협 (*muhyeop*, Wuxia) craze in the country, up until then dominated by rougher, streetfight-style flicks with nationalistic undertones.

He witnessed the early films of a young promising action star called Jet Li, and built an impressive knowledge about the genre. Yet up until then he just loved action films in general, he didn't have a particular idol in mind. That all changed when in primary school he caught a screening of Jackie Chan's 1978 film **醉拳 (Drunken Master)**. Picture some of the scenes in Yoo Ha's **말죽거리 잔혹사 (Once Upon a Time in High School)** to see just what effect the 'arrival' of stars like Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan on the Korean scene had on youngsters like him. He was so impressed by the film he instantly started taking Taekwondo Lessons. He kept watching his films over and over, from **笑拳怪招 (The Fearless Hyena)** to **蛇形刀手 (Snake in The Eagle's Shadow)**.

Yet, when it came to Korean films, Ryu didn't feel as excited. He wasn't old enough to... 'appreciate' the art behind Hostess films, and of course the meaty masterpieces of Yoo Hyun-Mok and Lee Man-Hee were a little too off the radar for a teenager who thought about kung fu stances on the way home from school. Here's when Ryu's tastes started to become a little more varied, ranging from comedies to even musicals, whose body language in some ways mirrored what he liked so much in Jackie Chan films, that kind of cinematic flow which exploded on the screen, and made him a fan for life. And that's the first key to understand Ryu's films, as we're not dealing with violence, but simply screen action. Which basically is the reason why Ryu preferred Chan's more kinetic flow to the more violent Bruce Lee films.

Lee was more of an icon of the youth than the kind of action star Jackie Chan became. While Lee's popularity in the Chinese market was filtered through a kind of nationalist transcendence, in Korea it had different elements of appeal, one of them being the fight against status quo and the corruption of the system (the system being the Yushin, obviously). And here's the first connection with **다찌마와 리 (Dajjimawa Lee)**: although the film might seem like a love letter to Korean action films of the 60s and 70s -- and it very well might be, as enjoying a film doesn't need a formula -- it was more as a reliving of the good old times, making a parody of the 'machismo kitsch' of the genre, in some ways similar to the way old-school fans of dubbed Shaw Brothers flicks in the US approach those films, sometimes even removing them from the historical context of the films themselves.

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[...Suddenly, the sound of steps cut the air, a mysterious figure approaching the scene...]

리 : 어서 그 더러운 손을 순결한 몸에서 떼어내지 못해!
(**Dajjimawa Lee**: Take your filthy hands off those innocent girls right now!)

[...Lee approached the scoundrels with a menacing stare...]

리 : 버얼걸 대낮에 아이들이 보아서는 안될 짓을 일삼는 한심한 녀석들·
(**Dajjimawa Lee**: By golly, do I have to see hopeless rascals like you parade the streets in broad daylight? Tsk tsk tsk...)

박 : 아니 이놈은 또 무어야?
(**Shanghai Park**: The hell... and who would this fool be?)

리 : 직업은 멀쩡하지만 너희 같은 무리들을 보면 참지 못하는 인간 미화원!
(**Dajjimawa Lee**: Moi? I usually tend not to get my hands dirthy, but seeing scumbags like you infest the streets makes me lose sleep. I'll have to do some cleaning today!)

화녀 : 영화의 한 장면 같다!
(**Lady Hwa-Nyeo**: Ohhh... this feels just like the movies!)

리 : 아가씨들, 괜찮소?
(**Dajjimawa Lee**: Ladies, did those Neanderthals bother you?)

충녀 : 두려워요! 도와주셔요!
(**Lady Chung-Nyeo**: We're scared! Please... you have to help us!)

--

Since censorship limited the amount of violence in Korean films of the 70s, especially compared to action films in the 60s, filmmakers had to add other elements to the mix. And since we're dealing with Korean Cinema, strong melodramatic overtones often permeated those films, which is why Ryu always considered them more of a bunch of unintentional comedies than the deadly serious genre pics they were presented as.

Ryu was already shooting short films in his Middle School days, with an 8mm Camera he bought saving lunch money for three years, and after graduating high school in 1992, he worked for six

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months to raise enough money to cover a year's worth of basic living expenses for his family. After that he joined a private Film Workshop, and paid his tuition trough several part-time jobs: as a construction worker, hotel janitor, and he drove one of those vegetables carts at the market so often shown in Korean films and TV Dramas. Hell, he even worked as instructor at an illegal driving school. Ryu, a fan of Park Chan-Wook's 1992 debut **달은.. 해가 꾸는 꿈 (The Moon is the Sun's Dream)**, and especially of his work as a critic, went to meet him and the two quickly became friends. Those formative years also saw Ryu's debut as a 'real' director, with the 1996 short **변질헤드 (Transmutated Head)**.

The plot? Seok-Hwan is enjoying his time at a mineral spring on a beautiful morning, when all of a sudden a conservative nut and a religious fanatic show up and start beating each other for no apparent reason. What could Seok-Hwan's choice have been? Help beat up the conservative? But then he'd get some fundamentalism and preaching down his throat. Or the other way? But then it'd be like going at a Chosun Ilbo aficionado reunion. This difficult compromise is at the center of this crazy 19 Minutes short, which featured many familiar faces in the Korean indie scene. Starring in the film were Heo Jong-Soo, who starred in many Park Chan-Wook films and recently the Moon Geun-Young melodrama **댄 서의 순정 (Innocent Steps)** and especially Lee Mu-Young, a former very controversial pop columnist who ended up becoming director of some of the craziest black comedies (mostly written by his good friend Park Chan-Wook) in Korean Cinema, the best being **휴머니스트 (Humanist)**.

But the crew was no different. Director of Photography was a young, promising Film Academy student who would later be active in several films (short and feature) in everything from lighting in Bong Joon-Ho's short **지리멸렬 (Incoherence)**, script writing in Min Byung-Cheon's 1999 submarine blockbuster **유령 (Phantom: The Submarine)** and assistant director in Park Gi-Yong's **모텔 선인장 (Motel Cactus)**. But the biggest impact came from his short film **2001 이매진 (2001 Imagine)**, and especially by his incredibly well received (at least by the press) feature debut: a little film called **지구를 지켜라! (Save The Green Planet)**. He, of course, was Jang Joon-Hwan. But perhaps the crew member Ryu trusted the most (at least I hope so) was a certain Kang Hye-Jung. No, it's not the star of **올드보이 (Oldboy)** and **연애의 목적 (Rules of Dating)** I'm talking about, but a film producer of the same name, who also happens to be Ryu's wife. The young director continued his work as assistant, on the influential box office success **여고괴담 (Whispering Corridors)**, which started the horror film trend en masse, and along with helping Park Chan-Wook as part of the assistant team of his 1997 film **3인조 (Trio)**, Ryu acted a little part in the film, mostly eating ramen noodles while leads Lee Kyung-Young and Kim Min-Jong were talking.

--

[...Despite Dajjimawa Lee's threats, the scoundrels don't seem to budge...]

박 : 하룻강아지 범 무서운 줄 모른다더니· 오늘 네 놈 제사나 치를 준비를 하여랏!
(**Shanghai Park**: Ha ha ha... seems like fools are rushing in where angels fear to tread. You can start preparing your funeral right now!)

40%

[...the leader looks at his acolytes with determination...]

박 : 분하다! (부하들을 보며) 무엇들 하느냐?! 저놈을 가루로 만들어라!
(**Shanghai Park**: Grrrr.... I can't stand this humiliation anymore. What are you waiting for? Disintegrate him!)

[...a brutal duel rages on, the ladies trembling with fear at the thought of losing their savior...]

와싱톤 : 형님!
(**Washington**: Bosssss! Bosssss!)

[...using his mental strength and experience, Dajjimawa Lee faces off admirably against his foes...]

박 : 아니 이 놈 감히 상하이 박의 다리를 걸어?!
(**Shanghai Park**: What.... errr... how dare you touch Shanghai Park! Do you know who you're dealing with?)

박 : 이얍!
(**Shanghai Park**: UHAWAAAAAAAH!)

리 : 에잇!
(**Dajjimawa Lee**: YAAHHHHHH!)

--

1998 became the most important year of his career at that point. With a few years of experience as assistant director, Ryu made another short film called **패싸움 (Rumble)**. The film won him the Best Film at the 1998 Busan Short Film Festival, and a year later he signed a contract to develop a feature film out of 'Rumble' and three following sequels, one of which was his short **현대인 (Modern Man)**, which was not only the audience's favorite, but also won Best Film at a Short Film Festival in 1999. The four shorts, shot on a ultra-low budget of around 65 Million Won, became Ryu's first feature film: **죽거나 혹은 나쁘거나 (Die Bad)**, and the legend of Chungmuro's 'Action Kid' began. Ryu had written several scripts in the past, even at night after a long day working at the hotel, some of which were mere ripoffs and pastiche of his favourite films, but he had already completed a good dozen of them before getting to the last part of 'Die Bad' (same title, in Korean 'Die or Bad'). Actually the original script of the whole 'Die Bad' was for a feature film straight from the beginning, but even though Ryu decided to shoot four different parts, it eventually ended up as a full-fledged film (which in parts explains why the four shorts connect so well one with the other, although they were shot in different time periods). It was 'only' a small indie film with no stars, but it ended up becoming one of the year's biggest sensations, just out of the Top 10 domestic films at the box office.

Many people expected him to get a huge budget from a powerful producer, and start changing the face of Korean action Cinema. And in some ways, he got his wish: if the entire 'Die Bad' cost 65 Million Won, his follow up would cost 60 Million, but it was a 35 Minutes film, made to take advantage of the power of the Internet in an increasingly 'wired' Korea. Along with two other short films, **다찌마와 리 (Dajjimawa Lee)** was born.

Where do you go from 'Die Bad'? Although the success of Ryu's debut 'film' was considered by many a miracle, the young director had many offers on the table, but he decided instead to rest, in a way, making a little Internet film -- part of a project which also involved Jang Jin and Kim Ji-Woon -- a parody of the Korean action films of the 60s and 70s he always enjoyed. And here's the key: enjoyed. Because even if people emphasized the impact of the violence in Ryu's past work, the director never really enjoyed violence. He used action as a tool, just like acting, music, cinematography and his own directing mind, all combining to improve the flow of the film. Ryu wanted an enjoyable action film, without excessive violence, and parodying 70s action films in Korea -- when censorship limited the amount of violence on screen tremendously -- was the perfect source for him.

--

[...Dajjimawa Lee successfully puts out the fire...]

리 : 이제 더 이상 어둠의 뒷골목을 방황하지 말고 광명을 찾아 바른 삶을 찾도록 하여라.
(**Dajjimawa Lee**: May this be a lesson. From now on, stop roaming in dark alleys. There's a bright future waiting for you out there, don't be afraid and never lose hope! Do the right thing!)

[...the scoundrels get on their knees in despair, repenting their insulting ways...]

리 : 어서들 돌아가!
(**Dajjimawa Lee**: Go! Find you way....)

50%

박 : 형님을 몰라 뵙고 까불어서 죄송합니다.(부하들을 돌아보며) 어서 가자!
Shanghai Park: We're mortified Sir. We made a fatally wrong decision... please accept our deepest apologies. Fellas, let's Go!)

[...as the scoundrels leave...]

회장 : 경아· 우리 심심한데, 뽀뽀나 한번 할까?·
(**Boss**: Kyung-Ah, there's nothing do. How 'bout a little kiss?)

경아 : 아이 부끄러워라·
(**Kyung-Ah**: Uhuhuhuh... I'm so ashamed...)

[...Kyung-Ah starts falling for the Boss' charms...]

경아 : (회장과 떨어지며)오빠· 이 동작 좋다!·
(**Kyung-Ah**: My dear! I love it!)

회장 : 그래? 그렇담 내 미치도록 해주지!
(**Boss**: Really? OoooooK then, I'll do as you wish!)

[...meanwhile, a voice from outside distracts the two...]

--

Some people might remember how Jang Jin essentially debuted on TV Comedy shows piecing together various scenes for Hollywood films on his personal corner. What Ryu did with 'Dajjimawa Lee' wasn't too different, except this time he took famous lines, looks, gestures and plot developments out of many of the films he grew up with. The dialogue in the film might be side splittingly hilarious in today's context, but Ryu did nothing but take some famous lines from older films, tossed them in the pot and formed what was one of the smartest little comedy scripts since Song Neung-Han's **넘버 3 (No. 3)**. The most obvious reference was a parody of Heo Jang-Gang's '김마담, 우리 심심한데 뽀뽀나 할까? (Madame Kim, there's nothing to do, shall we just kiss?)'. Although most of Heo's near 1000 roles in the past were as a baddie, his legacy with the public remains that of the charismatic gangster and 'ladies' man' who won over the heart of beautiful women. He also used a famous line in Lee Jang-Ho's classic **별들의 고향 (Hometown of the Stars)**, that '경아, 오랫만에 같이 누워보는군 (Kyung-Ah, it's been such a long time since we've been together)' which Shin Sung-Il made famous along with his partner Ahn In-Sook, and plenty of catchphrases from 70s action films, last but not least the legendary '하얀 가마귀 (White Crow)' line from Kim Bong-Hwan's 1970 film **오인의 왼손잡이 (Five Left-Handers)**.

But the most significant parody on display had nothing to do with action films: the name of the two ladies, 화녀 (Hwa-Nyeo) and 충녀 (Chung-Nyeo) were a homage to two of Kim Ki-Young's most famous films, **화녀 (Woman of Fire)** from 1971 and **충녀 (The Insect Woman)** from 1972. The film was actually supposed to be called **살인 나비를 쫓는 황야의 총잡이 (The Wild Gunman Chasing The Killer Butterfly)**, as a parody of Kim Ki-Young's films, but the director achieved such cult status after his death, that it felt like an insult. Although Ryu had already written the entire script of the film, he met Lee Won-Hyung, a scripter who helped him deal with some rough edges. Here's where the final name of the film was born. 다찌마와리 (Dajjimawari) had long been used in Chungmuro to describe action scenes, so the two decided to use 다찌마와 리 (Dajjimawa Lee) as the ironic title of the film.

--

와싱톤 : 형님!
(**Washington**: Boss!)

회장 : 아니 이 놈 와싱톤!
(**Boss**: What the... Washington! You little...)

[...Washington confesses their embarrassing failure to the Boss...]

회장 : 아니! 무어라고! 으아아아!
(**Boss**: WHAT? Who did WHAT?)

[...meanwhile, inside the bakery...]

리 : 많이들 들어요. 시장할 텐데·
(**Dajjimawa Lee**: Go ahead my ladies, eat all you want. You surely must be hungry!)

리 : 조심들 해야 해요. 특히 젊은 혈기에 뺑집이나 극장, 롤라장 같은 곳은 출입을 삼가는 게 좋을 게야.
(**Dajjimawa Lee**: You have to be careful. Especially vigorous youth like you, hanging out at places like the theater or the bakery you need to pay special attention)

[...the three get to know each other, and Chung-Nyeo seems to show particular affection...]

충녀 : 우리 멋쟁이 아저씬 웃음소리도 호탕하셔· 꺄르르르·
(**Chung-Nyeo**: Our beloved Sir... even your laughter shows such heroic temper! Huh huh huh...)

리 : 허허허· 우리 충녀 양은 성격이 활달한 반면, 화녀 양은 내성적인 것 같아?
(**Dajjimawa Lee**: Hahaha... my dear Chung-Nyeo seems to posses a very warm personality. Hwa-Nyeo is the introverted one, then?)

충녀 : 그래서 걱정이예요. 얘는 착하기만 했지 아무 것도 할 줄 아는 게 없다니까요.
(**Chung-Nyeo**: Ohhh... that's why I keep worrying. She's so nice, but can't do anything right...)

--

Now as you may know, the colonial period affected the way Korean films were made, but a generation of directors, actors and crew members kept using jargon from the colonial period even twenty years after Korea's independence. That's one of the reasons critics in Korea still use 신파 (*shinpa*) to describe over the top melodramas. 新派 (Shinpa) was a new genre of Japanese theater appearing during the Meiji era, much less abstract than its major 'rival' Kabuki, and of course much more melodramatic. And Kabuki theater is also responsible for the name of Ryu's film. One of the most used terms at the time was this 다찌마와리 (Dajjimawari), which has been shortened to 다찌마리 (Dajjimari) these days. Although nowadays most of the terminology comes in the form of English loanwords, 'Dajjimawari' is still in use: it simply meant all the action and movement done during action scenes. But what's its connection with Kabuki theater? That's simply the Korean spelling of the Kabuki jargon 立回り (Tachimawari). Tachimawari was the moment in a Kabuki performance when a spectacular fight scene would take place. Usually used in the form of stabbing motions or fights against death of one man against several opponents, the term had crossed over to films and eventually found its way to Korea. This in a way shows how much of a fan of B-Movies and Action films Ryu was, as few people really elaborate on why that word is still used today in Chungmuro.

If you look at the most 'prestigious' alumni of this 'Dajjimari/Dajjimawari' sect, you'll surely find a couple of names: Lee Dae-Geun and especially Park No-Shik. Now Ryu admitted he didn't remember much about Park's action roles, like the 용팔이 (yongpari) series, but there were many other spin-offs and rip-of... unofficial remakes, including the Lee Dae-Geun series with the same name. Yet, despite confessing he liked these films more for comic relief than anything else, 'Dajjimawa Lee' is full of hilarious touches from the 60s and 70s, and even makes some fun of the censorship system -- that hilarious scene with Ahn Gil-Gang, with a pulsating 'Viewer discretion' rating going from 15 to 19 as the 'lovers' start getting a little more into the act, and back to 15 as the camera moves to a fishtank nearby. The action, awkward and mistimed on purpose, is straight off those Park No-Shik action films, more focused on machismo than actual fighting skills. But the most striking homage to 60s action flicks is Im Won-Hee's dubbing in the film, straight from Wuxia flicks and Sirasoni/Kim Doo-Han series, and hilariously over the top.

You could certainly say 'Dajjimawa' would never work without Im Won-Hee. Other than being good friends, Ryu and Im mutually helped each other through this film, as Im's career wasn't exactly going exceptionally before this little short. An alumni of the legendary Daehak-Ro acting troupe 목화 (Mokhwa), Im starred in many of Jang Jin's theater plays, including **택시 드리벌 (Taxi Driver)**, **박수칠 때 떠나라 (Leave When They're Applauding)** and even a Korean version of **Romeo & Juliet**. But although he impressed in theater, his transition to films wasn't too smooth. His debut in Jang Jin's wild black comedy **기막힌 사내들 (The Happenings)** is worth a review of its own [and sure enough, 'The Happenings' will be part of this 'Memories of Midnight' series], but it was still too tied to his theater roots to flow with the rest of the film. Im went to school with Jang, and acted together with him in the 'Mokhwa' troupe, so they were already good friends before the film.

--

[...noises from outside attract the three's attention...]

와싱톤 : (쪽지를 내밀며) 으으윽· 여기·
(**Washington**: Uhh... ahhh...gaak... take t..this)

(**Dajjimawa Lee**: Wait a moment! I went to night school, I can't read during the day! You'll have to read it for me)

와싱톤 : 이름 모를 사나이 보아라. 네 놈은 오늘 돌이킬 수 없는 길로 발을 들어놓고 만 것이다. 어차피 떠난 망각의 길 앞에서 영광스런 최후를 맞이하려면 나와의 결투를 피히자 말아야할 것이다. 동방의 무적자? 쭉지를 거두고) 나는 이제 이만·윽!
(**Washington**: "For that fella whose name I do not know. You've walked on a street of no return today. Before you're buried into oblivion, if you wish to face one last time with I who holds your destiny in my hands, I won't deny you that pleasure. The wanderer from the East." Ok... I'm done.)

[...as Washington collapses, a group of sinister looking figures surrounds the three...]

충녀 : 선생님, 두려워요!
(**Chung-Nyeo**: Sir, I'm scared!)

리 : 당황하지 마시오.
(**Dajjimawa Lee**: Don't worry, my dear)

회장 : 역시 듣던 대로 보통 놈은 아니로구나. 네 놈 이름이라도 알고 싶다.
(**Boss**: You are just as they described you. Let me at least know your name, before you face your destiny)

리 : 꿸
(**Dajjimawa Lee**: Meh...)

회장 : 대답이 없는 걸 보니 무척 고독을 즐기는 모양이군. 네 놈에게 선택의 기회를 주마. 첫번째 길은 네 놈 솜씨를 썩히기 아까우니 내 밑에서 일할 수 있는 영과스런 기회를 주겠다.
(**Boss**: I gather you enjoy solitude. I'll give you two choices. First: It'd be a waste to lose your talents... how about you come under my wing. I'll give you the honour and opportunity to serve me!)

--

As people working in theater in Korea know all too well, it's not the kind of profession you do for the money. The late 90s were hard times for Im, who didn't get to act in one single film in his entire 3 years of theater school, but even though 'The Happenings' was a great chance for him, it didn't go as well as he planned. He commented he just wanted to burn the print from the embarrassment, but Jang gave him another chance in his 1999 film **간첩 리철진 (The Spy)**, where he played one of the four 'Taxi Hijackers' in what was a clear reference to Jang's play 'Taxi Driver'. Im only appeared for a few minutes, but he made his mark once again. After a small role in Ryu's debut **죽거나 혹은 나쁘거나 (Die Bad)**, Im starred in the maligned black comedy **공포 택시 (Ghost Taxi)** -- yes, the one which almost sent Lee Joon-Ik's Cineworld belly up -- so 'Dajjimawa' was his first big leading role. And by overacting as if there was no tomorrow, he made 'Dajjimawa' his career making film. After the incredible popularity the short achieved, Im starred on several CFs, bringing back the Dajjimawa Lee persona in some of the most hilarious commercials to ever grace Korean Tv.

Besides Im, the rest of the cast was all made up of Ryu's friends. He met Ahn Gil-Gang while working in Park Chan-Wook's **3인조 (Trio)**, and he later became a regular on his films, and of course his younger brother Ryu Seung-Beom played 'Washington', the young thug with an heart of gold, complete with over the top afro. Lee Yoon-Seong had a few roles and films on TV before this film, especially in Kim Ji-Woon's **조용한 가족 (The Quiet Family)**, and the rest of the 'thugs' essentially grew up professionally with Ryu.

Right from the opening, the film makes fun of glorious 60s action flicks, with a mysterious man (and his coat) surrounded by shadows kicking around a bunch of thugs, while a voiceover lists illustrious fighters and national heroes who populated the screens for decades. You're probably familiar with the Kim Doo-Han of **장군의 아들 (The General's Son)**, **야인시대 (The Rustic Era)** and a Million other films, and that's the kind of 'hero' we're dealing with. That 사나이 (*Sanai*), the real man who never backs down for a fight, that courageous figure who defends the weak, and gets the girl at the end. With a giant tongue in cheek stamped in front of everything else. Of course you could say 'Dajjimawa Lee' is a great achievement for Ryu, as he manages in 35 Minutes to show everything which was so (unintentionally) funny about that period's action Cinema, without necessarily disrespecting those figures. But Ryu did this film simply for fun, he got a few of his friends -- including his little brother -- went out, and kicked off all the pressure the press and his peers were throwing at him, waiting for his follow up after the shock of 'Die Bad'.

--

[...after Dajjimawa Lee refuses to comply with the Boss' requests, tension fills the air...]

리 : 어린 놈이 꿈을 꾸었구나.
(**Dajjimawa Lee**: You little scoundrel, you're daydreaming!)

[...the Boss catches one of the poor ladies in his trap...]

화녀 : 선생님· 선생님 앞에서 이렇게 눈을 감을 수 있어서 행복해요.
(**Hwa-Nyeo**: My dear Sir... I'm so happy I can close my eyes in front of you... awww)

[...as Hwa-Nyeo looks at Dajjimawa Lee with despair in her eyes, his rage reaches fever pitch...]

리 : 용기를 잃으면 안돼 화녀!
(**Dajjimawa Lee**: Be strong my darling! Don't lose hope!)

[...Dajjimawa Lee looks with disgust at the boss...]

회장 : 이런 멍청한 녀석들. 무엇들 하느냐!
(**Boss**: You foolish rascals! What are you doing? Get him!)

[...the Boss' acolytes go after Dajjimawa Lee...]

리: 우하아아아아아아앗!
(**Dajjimawa Lee**: hawhahaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!)

[...as Dajjimawa Lee screams, his chi surrounds the place with violence of an earthquake...]

[...a duel for the death begins in earnest...]

--

The storyline is a simple as they get, to go full force on the silly histrionics, the over-the-top dialogue and the hilarious action. But the film is also important as it opened a new age in Chungmuro. Korean film companies never really understood how to use the Internet efficiently, not only to promote their films but to take full advantage of the medium. Released by the now defunct Cine4M website alongside Jang Jin's **극단적 하루 (A Terrible Day)** and Kim Ji-Woon's **커밍 아웃 (Coming Out)**, the three 'mini-films' became hugely popular, with 'Dajjimawa Lee' reaching over a Million views. Although the Internet Film craze has died down by now, if Korean producers put so much effort on their websites and Internet activities nowadays, part of the merit should go to films like 'Dajjimawa Lee', which woke up people about the power of this medium.

Taking the film out of context, it's nothing more than a silly comedy with lame action. But even without seeing the films it so hilariously parodies, if you understand the thought process behind its dynamics, and if you reflect a little about Ryu's body of work, you'll see how much of his influences and love for genre Cinema flows in this film's cinematic veins. 'Dajjimawa Lee' is an ode to the often ignored, frequently maligned but nonetheless entertaining 'mad silliness' of genre Cinema in the 70s. It's one of the most brilliant parodies ever made in Korea, and deserves a bigger audience.

Although the short was released as part of the special features in the long out of print 'Die Bad' DVD, finding it online (you know where) shouldn't be too hard, waiting for someone in the West to add this little gem to a Ryu Seung-Wan film on DVD. A lot of the dialogue-based humour might be lost on a non-Korean speaking audience, but there's plenty of other charms to be enjoyed. Lots of hilarious memories to be made. Especially at midnight...

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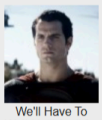
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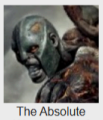
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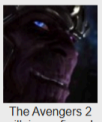
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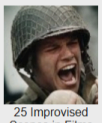
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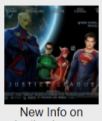
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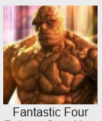
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x · 7 years ago

the real gem in there is the Ryu commentary. I thought I'd die laughing when he went: "Ooops... and what's that, the boom mike falling on the scene!".

So sad it went out of print. Amazing film, great DVD.

---

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Isao K · 7 years ago

YES!

Fantastic stuff, as always. And thunderbolt's right, these essays are some of the most invaluable online resources a Korean cinema fan can hope for. I'm already salivating for the next one.

So glad I bought the DIE BAD DVD before it went OOP. DL truly rocks. And yeah, Im Won Hee in THE SPY was hilarious ("코피..? 피맞쥐? 캐찹아니쥐?").

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thunderbolt · 7 years ago

I'm salivating. Is this gonna be a long series?

If I study what you write really hard, you reckon I could get an MA in Korean film history?

Anyway, X, you ROCK. Serious.

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